

THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

By C. VANN WOODWARD

IT would seem to be high time for some Southern historian to abandon temporarily the standoffishness of his guild and make his bow to Southern men of letters. Not that it is necessary at this late date to acknowledge that the literary men have earned the greater acclaim and distinction. That goes without saying. What is really needed is some acknowledgment of the genuine debt the historians owe to the poets, playwrights, and novelists—particularly the novelists—as well as an acknowledgment of vital relations between the crafts.

The generation of Southerners who went to college in the 1920's usually took a defensive attitude toward the history of their region, or affected indifference. It was an attitude compounded of several components: the college boy's revolt against the ideas and values of his parents, the striving to cover up a consciousness of provincialism, and an eagerness to appear abreast of the times, if not a little in advance. Even so staunch a traditionalist as Donald Davidson admitted the force of these impulses when he wrote in 1926: "The gallantries of the Lost Cause, the legends of Southern history—these he may admire, but they came to him mouthed over and cheapened . . . the treacly lamentations of the old school."

Being "old school" in the 1920's was the worst possible offense against the canons of the collegian, and he strove with all his might to avoid the charge. He readily gathered from the literary monitors of fashion and taste whom he admired that there was nothing issuing from his native region in the way of arts and letters that was worth his notice. When "The Sound and the Fury" appeared in 1929 he was assured by the *New Republic* that it "signified nothing." He also ab-

sorbed the impression from numerous quarters that the history of the South was generally discreditable if not faintly ridiculous. All things considered, it was not the most auspicious background for one who aspired to become a Southern historian.

The Southerner who was graduated about 1930 was soon aware of new voices in the land and new forces astir. He doubtless derived some encouragement from the contemporary awakening of historical scholarship, particularly if he hoped to be a historian. But it was soon apparent that the stir among historians was only a minor aspect of a wider intellectual awakening in the South. The most brilliant manifestation was in the field of letters and literary criticism. To mention only a few books of one author, within the three years beginning in 1929 there appeared William Faulkner's "Sartoris," "The Sound and the Fury," "As I Lay Dying," "Sanctuary," and "Light in August"—a one-man renaissance by 1932. Katherine Anne Porter's first book, "Flowering Judas," appeared in 1930. Shortly before that there arose the bright star of Thomas Wolfe with the appearance of "Look Homeward, Angel." Of all American novels, that is the book of the young man, especially the young Southerner, and no one who read it in his youth will forget the strange excitement of the experience. The early thirties were stirring years to be discovering the South and its history and spending the years of one's youth.

The spice of controversy and polemic was added by the Nashville manifesto, "I'll Take My Stand," in 1930. Counterblast provoked counterblast, and the controversy raged on in the pages of Davidson's "Attack on Leviathan" and in successive numbers of the *American Review* and later in the *Southern Review*. With the establishment of the latter in 1935 the center of the avant garde of American literary criticism shifted temporarily to the banks of the Mississippi at Baton Rouge. Gradually the pundits and critical moguls on the Hudson began to alter their tone about the "Sahara of

the Bozart." An occasional note of praise, then of cautious respect, were succeeded by fulsome acclaim and eventually by a sort of awed puzzlement at this sudden flowering of the cultural desert. The young Southerner took a vicarious pride in all this achievement, a pride that did wonders for his provincial inferiority complex. He hailed the new names as they appeared—Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams—and new ones kept on arriving upon the scene.

Allen Tate spoke of this outpouring as "quite temporary" in 1935 and thought that year marked "the height of the Southern literary renaissance." But in 1935 some of the brighter luminaries had not yet appeared on the horizon. Again, in 1945 Tate wrote that "that Renaissance is over. . . ." But in 1955 Andrew Nelson Lytle could declare: "The Renaissance has been going on for thirty years with little sign of diminishment." The fact is that we have grown up with this movement, and it will remain for a later generation to fix its limits and assess its achievements.

Our concern here is with its significance for the historian rather than with its place in history. It was early apparent that the new Southern writers had something special to say to the historian, something that no other living American writers—and few dead ones—seemed to say. If he had read any American literature in college it was not likely to have been of Southern origin. The literary awakening of the Middle West was still in the public eye in the twenties, and the collegian of that era plowed through his Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. There was little in their pages to increase his respect or deepen his appreciation for the uses of history. The characters in the novels of Dreiser, Anderson, and Lewis appear on the scene from nowhere, trailing no clouds of history, dissociated from the past. They seem to have left it behind them in New England, or Norway, or Bavaria, and along with their past they checked their forebears, their historical roots and associations. One has the feeling that they con-

sidered that heritage a good riddance. They rarely discuss it, and one gathers there was no room for it in such baggage as they brought along to Gopher Prairie, Winesburg, or Chicago.

In the work of some later writers the historical perspective is even more flat. Hemingway's characters appear to live completely in the present. To emphasize their historical rootlessness, they are invariably pictured as expatriates, as wanderers, as soldiers or adventurers. They are temporarily in Italy or Spain, in France or Africa, in Cuba or the Florida Keys. A Hemingway hero with a grandfather is inconceivable, and he is apparently quite as bereft of uncles, aunts, cousins, and in-laws, not to mention neighbors and poor relations. With Dos Passos the story is somewhat different. But for all his marvelous gift for evoking a given place or a period of the recent past (a gift historians can but envy), his characters are exclusively preoccupied with personal problems or with social problems of their own time. They are haunted by no ghosts of the past, and the past does not seem to be part of the present. If our collegian was coached through a reading of the literary flowering of New England that took place a century or more ago, he will have discovered little more of the historical dimension than he found in the more recent schools. The New Englanders, with the exception of Hawthorne, regularly pictured the individual starkly alone with his problems, his wilderness, or his God. Cooper and Henry James offer a certain amount of historical depth, but the characters of Melville appear to live entirely in the present or the future and to concern themselves seldom with the past.

To discover the new school of Southern fiction after 1930 was to enter suddenly upon a new world of the imagination, a world in which the historical imagination played a supreme part. In his essay on "The Profession of Letters in the South," Allen Tate has fixed upon "The peculiarly historical consciousness of the Southern writer" as the secret spring of creative energies that has fed the whole literary movement in

the South during the last three decades. Tate has also suggested an historical explanation for the intellectual awakening of the South and the heightening of historical consciousness so characteristic of it. He suggests that after the First World War the South arrived at a crossroads of history where an old traditional order was being rapidly obliterated and a new modern order was being simultaneously brought to birth. Caught at these crossroads, the Southerner was made more keenly conscious at once of the present and of the past. His sensitivity to present change heightened his awareness of past differences, and his intensified remembrance of things past added corresponding poignancy to his awareness of things present. As Tate put it, "that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present."

A claim to what Tate called "the peculiarly historical consciousness of the Southern writer" was made by Ellen Glasgow in her posthumously published autobiography. "I had been born," she wrote, "with an intimate feeling for the spirit of the past, and the lingering poetry of time and place." In the last of his ten volumes Arnold Toynbee advances the theory that "the vividness of historical impressions is apt to be proportionate to their violence and painfulness," and speculates that "a child who had lived through the American Civil War in the territory of the Southern Confederacy would be likely to grow up more historical-minded than one who had lived through the same experience at the North." In this connection a statement of Katherine Anne Porter has some relevance. "I am a grandchild of a lost War," she writes in "The Days Before," "and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation."

In emphasizing the place that historical consciousness plays in contemporary Southern writing, I have no reference to the vogue of the conventional historical novel. The South has produced its share of the historical romance output, and dur-

ing the early years of the present century when the market reached one of its peaks, Southern romancers produced considerably more than their share of best-sellers. But production figures reveal no particular regional concentration. The Northern and Western writers have proved themselves as handy at this craft as the Southern. Their product has little to do with Tate's "literature conscious of the past in the present." And it might be observed parenthetically that modern craftsmen of that school sometimes reverse Tate's description and tend at times to interject a dubious awareness of the present in the past. At any rate, we are not concerned here with the historical romance—whether its purpose is to score some point about the present or to settle some score about the past.

It is interesting but quite tangential to the argument that the first books of two leading figures of the Southern Renaissance were not in the field of fiction but of history. These were Allen Tate's biography of Stonewall Jackson, published in 1928, and Robert Penn Warren's biography of John Brown, published in 1929. It is also a source of great fascination to the historian—though still neither essential nor quite relevant to the thesis—that some of our most gifted novelists have chosen historical periods or figures or movements as subjects. Ellen Glasgow set out early in her career to write what she described as "a social history of Virginia" from 1850 to 1912. It must be admitted, however, that none of her "Novels of the Commonwealth," as she called them, are among her best works. Faulkner has been engaged for the better part of three decades in rounding out his Yoknapatawpha world of McCaslins, Sartorises, and Compsons; its MacCallums, Bundrens, and Snopeses; its Joe Christmases, Lucas Beauchamps, and Charles Bons. While this saga so far represents the supreme creation of the Southern Renaissance, it is not history in any usual sense. And it is not unlikely that the Faulkner critics have gone astray in thinking of the Yoknapatawpha novels as Southern history in micro-

cosm, or as representing any very consistent ideas or theories about Southern history. In the universality of their meaning they are more, and in their immediate application, less than that.

The Southern novelist who comes nearest approaching an historical subject after the manner of an historian is Warren. Yet Warren is careful and perfectly correct to warn the reader of "Night Rider" that "Although this book was suggested by certain events which took place in Kentucky in the early years of the century, it is not, in any strict sense, a historical novel." What Warren has pronounced "the bone-headedness or gospel-bit hysteria" of those who insist upon making either history or a political tract out of "All the King's Men" drives the author to despair. He quotes Louis Armstrong as remarking, "There is some folks that if they don't know, you can't tell 'em." While Warren selects the same sort of subject matter as the historian—the Black Patch War in Kentucky during the first decade of the century, a financial tycoon of Tennessee in the twenties, or a demagogue of Louisiana in the thirties—he could rightly say of them all, as he said of the first, that they are not historical novels in any strict sense. At the same time it could be as accurately said that they quicken and vivify our consciousness of history in a way that conventional historical novels, as well as many bona fide histories, do not.

The relevance of the theme of "historical consciousness" in Southern letters would have been the same had the novelists never tackled a historical subject or treated any period prior to Appomattox. It is not the period or the subject that is the point but, in Tate's words, the consciousness of the past in the present. Here, among many possible illustrations, one thinks of Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda, in "Old Mortality," seeking through the years of her youth to find and come to terms with her family's past and her own past and to relate them to the present. Or of Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant, "the haunter of himself, trying for a moment to re-

cover what he had been part of . . . a stone, a leaf, an un-found door," and lyrically imploring, "Ghost, come back again." Or of Faulkner's Quentin Compson in "Absalom, Absalom!" groping through the convolutions of Colonel Sutpen's incredible legend for an answer to Shreve McCannon's questions in 1910. Or of Warren's Jack Burden in "All the King's Men" brooding endlessly over the faded letters and diaries of Cass Mastern for a lost meaning to the past and a key to the present in the 1930's.

This preoccupation, this almost obsessive concern of Southern writers with the past in the present has been expressed often explicitly as well as implicitly in their stories. Thus John Peale Bishop wrote in his essay, "The South and Tradition," that "without a past we are living not in the present, but in a vague and rather unsatisfactory future." Katherine Anne Porter remarks of Miranda's family that "their hearts and imaginations were captivated by their past," but while the author never treats that past as such, it is constantly obtruding itself into the present she does treat. On the other hand, Ellen Glasgow did repeatedly treat historical episodes and epochs, but her most successful use of the past was probably in such unhistorical novels as "Barren Ground" and "The Sheltered Life." For all his reference to the Old South, Faulkner has never attempted a full-bodied treatment of the Civil War, as much as it impinges on his major themes. His themes have been preponderantly those of the post-bellum South. Still, he has Gavin Stevens say in "Intruder in the Dust," "The past is never dead. It's not even past." In the course of a bear hunt we are taken all the way back to tribal life among the aborigines of Mississippi through Sam Fathers, their descendant. For the Southern school the present is a fleeting segment of the cumulative past, and might be described by the concluding words of "All the King's Men": ". . . out of history, into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

Another deeply embedded trait of the Southern novelists

that has strong appeal to the historian is their way of treating man not as an individual alone with his conscience or his God, as the New Englanders were inclined to do, or alone at sea with a whale or a marlin, or alone in a ring with a bull, but as an inextricable part of a living history and community, attached and determined in a thousand ways by other wills and destinies of people he has only heard about. Herbert Marshall McLuhan has remarked that "The sense of belonging to a great chain of persons and events, passive yet responsible, is everywhere in Faulkner." And he quotes T. S. Stribling on "the chain of wrongs and violences out of which his life had been molded." In his most recent novel Warren has its narrator say, "You live through time, that little piece of time that is yours, but that piece of time is not only your own life, it is the summing-up of all the other lives that are simultaneous with yours." This, in sum, is also the way the historian tries to see the individual and the forces that mold him.

Francis B. Simkins has urged that "The historian of the South should join the social novelist who accepts the values of the age and section about which he writes." The trouble lies in the ambiguities of the verb "to accept." And there is also the question of which values and what age. Faulkner certainly never accepted the values of the Snopeses, nor of the Compsons either. For it is just the tragedy of the Compsons in "The Sound and the Fury" that in the person of Jason Compson they *did* accept the values of the age—the age of the Snopeses. The historian like the novelist should not change his values with his ages, whether it is the age of Colonel Sutpen or of Jason Compson. This was precisely the mistake of the John B. Gordons and Basil Dukes and their generation. They did.

The best of the Southern novelists have never set out to defend the values or the prejudices or the errors of any particular age or section. It is true that their books are often filled with tales of horror and lust and betrayal and degrada-

tion. But they have not paused to reckon their popularity in attacking the values of their own age or any other. They have not set up as defenders of a cause, either one lost or one still sought. They have proved themselves able to confront the chaos and irony of history with the admission that they can fit them into no neat pattern and explain them by no pat theory.

The historian is fortunate, I think, in sharing a period with literary men of great talent who share so many of his own values, so much of his own outlook and point of view, and so much of his own subject matter. He can afford to take pride in their achievements and comfort in their example. This is no plea for the relaxation of the severe limitations of the historian's discipline, nor for his borrowing the novelist's license. But once the historian abandons an old and false analogy with the natural sciences and sees that his craft employs no special concepts nor categories nor special terminology, he will admit that he attempts to "explain" history in the same way he explains events in ordinary life—his own as well as that of his fellow men—and with much the same language, moral and psychological. He should then be willing to acknowledge that Southern men of letters have advanced many of the aims he shares. They have helped us penetrate the romantic haze of an older generation as well as the cynical stereotypes of our own. They have endowed the denigrated and emotionally impoverished New South with a sense of tragedy and dignity that history had hitherto reserved for the Old Régime, and they have enriched our consciousness of the past in the present. They have helped to bring the Negro into intelligible focus without the glasses of sentimentality. And they have given history meaning and value and significance as events never do merely because they happen. These are things the historian also strives to do, and he should seek to do them with the same fortitude and honesty.